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RUCPDOC/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC PRIORITY
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RHEHAA/NSC WASHDC
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 JEDDAH 000004

SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: JEDDAH CHAMBER OF COMMERCE: A GATEWAY THROUGH
COOPERATION TO A MORE OPEN SOCIETY

REF: A. 09 JEDDAH 473
1B. 09 JEDDAH 488 AND PREVIOUS
1C. 09 JEDDAH 50

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11. (SBU) Summary: Ambassador Smith's December 28 visit to the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI) revealed an active organization on the front line of social change in Saudi Arabia. Ambassador met with Deputy Chair Dr. Lama Sulaiman, the first woman to be elected to this position (ref A), and other members of the JCCI board of directors. The meeting covered U.S. trade delegations, visa issues, JCCI's relief efforts following the devastating November 25 flood (ref B), and the Chamber's desire to participate in professional exchanges and disaster relief training for volunteers. In view of a more forward-leaning and cooperative attitude struck by JCCI during the meeting, under its new leadership, Consulate Jeddah intends to pursue openings on several fronts. End summary.

MORE TIME FOR U.S. TRADE DELEGATIONS, MORE VISAS FOR SAUDI BUSINESSMEN

12. (SBU) JCCI Deputy Chairpersons Dr. Lama Sulaiman and Mazen Batterjee, with board members Abdul Khaliq Saeed and Ziad Bassam Al-Bassam, expressed an interest in receiving more U.S. trade delegations in Jeddah. Dr. Sulaiman noted, however, that the U.S. delegates' schedules were usually "too busy" to allow for sufficient meeting time to exchange information and forge long-term relationships necessary to do business in Saudi Arabia. Sulaiman suggested a schedule for future visits that allotted more time for JCCI members, with much earlier advance notice of delegations, so JCCI could help ensure the visits would be successful. (Note: JCCI employees have also expressed frustration with the last-minute scheduling of SAG-organized delegations, such as recent visits by U.S. mayors and state legislators. End note.) FCS Officer mentioned an upcoming delegation led by the US-Saudi Arabian Business Council, scheduled to visit Jeddah February 12-16 during the Jeddah Economic Forum (JEF). JCCI offered to arrange a meeting room for the delegation to use during its visit, and to assist with arranging meetings and visits to companies and factories. (Note: Some U.S. trade delegations last year had perceived a lack of JCCI interest, so this meeting marks a change of direction. JCCI's seeming lack of interest may have been due -- at least in part -- to turmoil within the organization following the removal of its chairman (ref C). End note.)

¶3. (U) Discussion about U.S. trade delegations coming to Saudi Arabia prompted the JCCI leaders to express an interest in participating in trade shows in the United States, which evolved into a conversation about visas, and an inquiry regarding when full visa operations will be restored in Jeddah. Consul General noted that Consulate Jeddah already facilitates visa issuance for specific business-oriented travel, and he described interim plans to process a higher number of visa applications in the coming months, and to resume full visa services in Jeddah when the New Consulate Compound opens.

JCCI AS POSSIBLE HOST FOR U.S. STUDENT INTERNS

¶4. (U) The visa discussion prompted JCCI's manager of logistics Henna Al-Maimani to talk about the importance of student and professional exchanges and the JCCI's willingness to start exchange programs. As a recent participant in an International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) on NGOs and civic participation, she reflected on how much she benefited from her experience, and expressed a desire to host American students or recent college graduates as interns at the Chamber, and then perhaps in private Saudi companies. Ambassador responded that we would very much like to pursue such opportunities.

FLOOD RELIEF EFFORTS: VOLUNTEERS TO THE RESCUE

¶5. (U) In demonstrating the level of activity and civic engagement of the JCCI, Dr. Sulaiman explained that the Chamber had been heavily involved in the aftermath of the November 25 Jeddah flood. The JCCI now houses a corporate

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social responsibility department, with 7,000 registered volunteers. Sulaiman boasted that the JCCI's effort to distribute food from their warehouse to the flood victims had been extremely successful and that efforts were ongoing. She attributed this success to the clear plans that the JCCI put in place to guide the volunteers that showed up in the affected areas. Sulaiman noted, however, that the volunteers have been less successful in rebuilding the 3000 homes damaged by the flood, and expressed interest in learning more about the work of the U.S. NGO Habitat for Humanity. Ambassador Smith recommended JCCI contact the group to inquire about the possibility of training volunteers in Saudi Arabia. Board members present agreed that there is a great need for training volunteers on how to organize and assist in disaster relief operations in the Kingdom. (Comment: The recent response to the Jeddah flood has been characterized by an unprecedented interest in volunteerism among individuals and organizations in Saudi Arabia. End comment.)

¶6. (U) CG inquired about the possibility of using resources and capacities devoted to the Hajj for housing the displaced flood victims. Sulaiman replied that the JCCI had explored the option of housing displaced persons in Mina (which holds 1.3 million pilgrims during Hajj season), near Mecca, after the conclusion of Hajj, but JCCI and other Jeddah leaders could not convince the flood victims themselves to relocate even temporarily. The vast majority of residents of southeast Jeddah affected by the flood preferred to remain in their homes even amid the extensive flood damage.

COMMENT: A NEW AND MORE COOPERATIVE TONE AT JCCI

¶7. (SBU) The JCCI and other chambers of commerce around the Kingdom remain the only organizations that allow for direct election of the majority of their governing board. (Note: The previous JCCI board included four Saudi women, two elected, two appointed; the current board has three women, one elected, two appointed. End note.) Dr. Sulaiman is the first woman to be elected to fill one of JCCI's Deputy

Chairperson positions, and she is clearly using this historic achievement to set a new, more forward-leaning and cooperative tone at the Chamber. Sulaiman belongs to an influential merchant family in Jeddah, and in her focused, low key, congenial, quietly insistent way, she is both outspoken and effective, commanding a great deal of authority over the male board members based on their respect for her experience, competence and professional manner. It is worth noting that her interactions with fellow board members during the meeting, the first time we have seen her actually lead (versus merely attend) a meeting with male board members, were firm but warm and very collegial. JCCI Board Chairman Saleh Kamel was not present, perhaps due to health issues, including his reported confinement to a wheelchair.

¶8. (SBU) The JCCI's new openness to U.S. trade delegations, professional exchanges, civic engagement (through volunteerism) and women's leadership are all positive indicators of the chamber's potential to promote gradual social change from within the Jeddah area's business community and socio-economic upper strata. Post will pursue these opportunities for increased cooperation delineated above. End comment.

¶9. (U) Ambassador Smith has cleared this message.
QUINN